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ABSTRACT

Children's understandings about people of color are enhanced when they have opportunities to dialogue. Similarities and differences between people can be identified, appreciated, and celebrated. Jerome Bruner, among others, has indicated that stories lure readers into thinking that what they are receiving is a transparent description of the real world; therefore educators must be careful in selecting a balanced and authentic sample of books about people of all races, ethnic conditions and cultures. All children need to see themselves as authentically and positively reflected as part of humanity. As multicultural literature comprises only about 2% of all books written for children, however, educators may find it difficult to find literature appropriate to these purposes. Books that depict more than one race interacting are particularly hard to find. "Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print" (R. R. Bowker Publishers) and "Collected Perspectives" (Christopher Gordon Publishers) are two helpful resources. An important part of teaching multicultural literature is encouraging dialoguing about that literature before, during, and after the reading. This dialoguing could take several forms: (1) spontaneous whole-class input after listening to a story or while looking at illustrations; (2) literature study groups; (3) individual conferences; (4) journaling; (5) opportunities for children to respond to characters by recording messages on tape; (6) improvised role plays based on situations from the book; and (7) play writing based on situations from the book. ("Overlays" are included, as well as small group activity sheets.) (TB)

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ED 374 426

DIALOGUING ON THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RACIALLY/ETHNICALLY IDENTIFIABLE CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Paper Presented at the NCTE Spring Conference
(Portland)
March 10, 1994

Dr. Elaine Vilscek

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DIALOGUING ON THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RACIALLY/ETHNICALLY IDENTIFIABLE CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

INTRODUCTION: In addressing the title of this presentation, *Dialoguing on the Interactions Between Racially/Ethnically Identifiable Characters in Children's Books,* I'd like to talk with you about fictional children's literature that focuses especially on people of color and then engage you in considering:

How characters in these books are "poised" to interact with one another and

How as teachers, we might facilitate dialogue about the books with children who have read or have listened to these stories.

But, before we proceed, it might be helpful to arrive at some group consensus on at least three terms, frequently used as labels for books about human diversity.

(PROJECT OVERLAY 1 - THE TERMS)

and Elicit audience definitions

(PROJECT OVERLAY 2 - EXERCISE IN MATCHING TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

and Elicit audience participation in making connections

My own observations about these terms is **That we have** used them synonymously as we talk about children's literature–**That we've** used the umbrella label, "multicultural literature," when indeed the authors of the selections have focused primarily on race/racial elements and not particularly on broader elements of international cultural roots/cultural context. But, rather than debate about the terminology and how the terms apply to the literature samples that I'll be showing you, I hope to address the following questions and invite your input.

OVERLAY 1

RACIAL

ETHNIC

MULTICULTURAL

OVERLAY 2

MATCH THE TERMS AND DEFINITIONS AS THEY ARE REFLECT CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ON DIVERSITY

RACIAL	about a group of people that can be identified within a larger society on the basis of such factors as religion, language, ancestry, and physical traits including skin color
ETHNIC	about the arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought created by a people or a group of people at a particular time
CULTURAL	about a group of people considered to be more or less distinct on the basis of skin color and other physical characteristics that are transmitted genetically.

OVERLAY 3

Using the literature of diversity with children in our elementary classrooms is a weighty responsibility. And, as I was browsing through my personal collection of children's books, I came across Judith Viorst's book of poetry entitled, "If I Were in Charge of the World and Other Stories." As some of you may remember the poem that bears the book title goes like this:

(Read It)

The poem is delightful but it seems to me that as teachers, at all grade levels, we have already been charged with a "world responsibility" --- that is -- preparing our students for a world we ourselves have not lived in and that some of us may never know intimately: the world of the 21st century. Ethnographers have projected, however, that people of color will be predominant in that 21st century world. As U.S. populations of ethnic and racial minorities have increased, we've turned to children's literature as a resource in helping children to realize, through books like this one (Show: **The Top and the Ball**), that looking at a "surface element of humanity," such as race or skin color, may be misleading.

(Read portions of the book: *The Top and the Ball*
Hans Christian Andersen, Ideals Publishers, 1992)

We have also involved children with ethnic/racial literature in helping them to learn that regardless of differences in ethnicity/race, humans are connected as similar or parallel needs, desires, and emotions crisscross.

(Show: *Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco, Philomel Publishers, 1992)

Stories, like *Chicken Sunday*, that children read or listen to can be very powerful. Last March, 1992, when Jerome Bruner, the noted developmental and cognitive psychologist, spoke at the opening session of the NCTE Spring Conference, he addressed this power of "story." Dr. Bruner stated -- "authors lure readers and

OVERLAY 3

A. What purposes should ethnically/racially focused children's literature books serve in our elementary classrooms?

B. How available are these books? Do they include authentic but positive models of people of color and how they interact within own specific ethnic/racial group? Do these books include a mix of people of color interacting positively and successfully? Is this literature, for children of high quality?

C. What are some of the themes, common to mainstream children's literature, that are being played out in books that focus on. people of color. Are the themes broadly based to adequately reflect characters who connect with and interact in their own racial/ethnic groups as well as across cultural contexts?

D. How, as teachers, can we facilitate the positive dialoguing of children about the interactions of characters in stories? How can we help youngsters to understand their own interpretations and realize that their own reactions to the characters can be different, yet stated positively, honestly, and appropriately?

listeners increasingly into thinking that what they are receiving is a transparent description of the real world." To me this statement is a reemphasis of how careful we must be in selecting a balanced and authentic sample of books about people of all races, ethnic conditions, and cultures. All of our children need to see themselves authentically and positively reflected as a part of humanity. They must be given images of themselves that they want to identify with in books and are proud of. From this base of a positive self concept, **ethnically/racially focused literature should serve the following valued purposes:**

OVERLAY 4

In view of these valued purposes that racial/ethnic literature can serve,

B. *How available are these books? Do they include authentic but positive models of people of color and how they interact within their own specific ethnic/racial group? Do these books include a mix of people of color interacting positively and successfully? Is this literature, for children, of high quality?*

According to Violet Harris and others, when we talk about multicultural literature in the United States, we are really referring primarily to books about people of color. She adds further that one of the reasons we prefer to label books with a racial/ethnic focus as multicultural is that we want to avoid the term, minority literature. The term minority, itself, is perceived to carry the connotations of "low status" and inferiority. The books about people of color, or if you prefer to call them books that focus on race and ethnicity, constitute only **1-2%** of all the books that have been published for children. Though in the past 10-15 years there has been an increase in the publication of such children's literature, finding books that contain characters who authentically represent the many different socio-cultural experiences that children of a specific color have had is a challenge.

OVERLAY 4

ETHNICALLY/RACIALLY FOCUSED LITERATURE:

1. Lends to children's insights of how they as individuals and humanity, in general, are connected through similar needs, emotions, desires, and even parallel experiences.

2. Can generate understanding, respect for, and appreciation of race/ethnicity different from own.

3. Is reassuring that while humans have different physical characteristics, languages, ancestry, religions, etc., we can still interact with one another and live in harmony.

Equally frustrating to me when I look for children's books that are ethnically/racially focused is finding enough quality books that include a mix of people of color, in a single selection, modeling positive character interactions.

(SHOW: 1991 Newberry Winner *Maniac McGee* as an example by Jerry Spinelli, *Little, Brown Publisher.*)

The books that I find, instead, are more often focused, like *Tar Beach*, on one ethnic/cultural group.

(SHOW: *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold, Scholastic Publication, 1991)

In other words, in these available books, interactions between characters within a specific group of people of color are more frequently modeled than interactions between characters who are representatives of other racial/ethnic groups. My preceding comment is not intended to suggest that books that authentically enhance racial/ethnic specifics are of lesser importance. I'd just like see more quality publications for children that include the mix of people of color interacting with one another, effectively.

Keeping in mind the kinds of books with a racial/ethnic focus that are published for children and are available, what should teachers reflect on or have pupils think about as books about people of color are evaluated? Rather than verbalizing a set of criteria to use when selecting such literature for your classroom, I invite you to form small groups and address a set of evaluative questions about a book that I'll give each of you in the group. The books are intentionally limited in number of pages due to the time constraints of this CCIRA session. Please remember, as you listen to the story being read aloud by someone you've designated as your group's reader, that the

interactions between characters may be presented subtly by the book author in modes other than through characters dialoguing with one another. Illustrations, descriptions, explanations, implied questions, and even character monologues, etc. can reflect interactions between two or more characters.

(Group the audience in attendance. Distribute to groups, of *five* or *six* per group, a book and the activity direction sheet.)

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY SHEET

"Reflecting on the Interactions Between Racially/Ethnically Identifiable Characters in Children's Books"

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DIRECTIONS: Select someone in your group who will read aloud the book you have been given. Read the set of questions on this sheet before you listen to the story. Keep in mind, as you listen to the story. Keep in mind, as you listen to the story, that characters' interactions may be presented subtly by the book author, in modes other than through characters dialoguing with one another. Complete this activity by answering the questions on this sheet as efficiently as possible within a maximum time of *15 minutes*.

1. Are the people of color recognizable and identifiable racially/ethnically without inclusion of stereotypic physical characteristics?
2. Are the interactions between people of color, within an ethnic group and/or between people of different colors, substantive and authentic?
3. Is the setting for character interactions appropriately integral and authentic?
4. Is the language or communicative behaviors of characters natural, accurate, and authentic without traces of the substandard or of offensiveness?
5. Are people of color portrayed as effective thinkers who express ideas and feelings clearly?
6. Does the author honor and celebrate the racial and ethnic diversity of characters? Are the similarities between people equally honored and celebrated?
7. Does the author present a rationale, implicitly or directly, for a particular point of view or mood projected as story characters interact or react to one another?

8. When the fictional story contains a mix of characters of color, including whites, do characters act equivalently as leaders and as followers? Can they resolve problems equally successfully and answer questions equally effectively?
9. Do the interactions of characters in the story make it more interesting, more meaningful, or more enabling for the reader/listener to establish a personal relationship with story characters?
10. Is the quality of the selection equivalent to other good books that are not ethnically/racially focused?

C. *What are some of the themes, common to mainstream children's literature, that are being played out in books that focus racially/ethnically? Are themes broadly based to adequately reflect characters who connect with and interact in their own racial/ethnic groups as well as across cultural contexts?*

1. The *most recently published books about people of color* can be categorized within literary themes common to mainstream fictional literature. Some of these *common, broadly based themes* include focuses on family memories and relationships (i.e. siblings, parents,) inter-generational interaction; places that people call home; environmental concerns; folk wisdom; self expression through the arts; children making a difference; self identity issues; culturally connected traditions and rituals (i.e. street songs [jump rope], family dinners, church festivities, etc.); love, beauty, friendships; societal problems (i.e. unemployment, single parenting, abuse, etc.); every day life and activities; acceptance of others; birth, death, etc.

2. *SHOW - Sampling of recently published children's books that reflect a specific theme played out within different racial/ethnic groups and include characters interacting within or between people of color:

OVERLAY #4

3. Teacher References to Listings of Children's Books That are Categorized and Lend to Focused Themes
   - Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print: R. R. Bowker Publishers, Annually Updated - Over 6,000 subject headings under which children's books currently in print are listed.
   - Collected Perspectives - Christopher Gordon Publishers - Edited by Hughes Moir, 1992 - an evaluated index of approximately 1,000 reviews of recent books for grades K-12, categorized by age/grade level. Contains a **Subject Index**, (that includes multicultural studies), **Title Index**, and **Author Index**.

Having searched for racially/ethnically focused books on broadly based themes, I have found that there are materials about the interactions of people of different color within specific racial groups. Fewer, to date, are published and available as models of interactions between people of different ethnic/racial heritages. The themes themselves are appropriately broadly based, however, to accommodate newly published books that reflect desirable exchanges between people of different races.

D. How, as teachers, can we facilitate, the positive dialoguing of children about the interactions of characters in stories? How can we help youngsters to understand

their own interpretations and realize that their individual reactions to the characters can be different, yet stated positively, honestly, and appropriately?

1. Our goals as teachers, when we are involved in **Facilitating Positive Classroom Dialogue**.
   a. Helping children feel secure in their own responses - building with them a trust of their own feelings and ideas
   b. Helping youngsters, individually, understand why they respond as they do - how their responses are connected to their own lives
   c. Building a community of learners (join fostering) that includes children respecting one another's responses
   d. Helping children recognize similarities and differences in their responses
      How these similarities and differences are connected to the life experiences of the responder
      How their individual responses are different but appropriate

2. What we do in the classroom to accomplish our goals (adapted from Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland Language, Literature, and the Child, 1993)
   a. Continue to add to our knowledge about children - as children first and then as individual members of a specific racial/ethnic group
   b. Continue to look at newly published racially/ethnically focused books for the children - who authors them - the kinds of insights the authors themselves may offer and whether or not the insights are accurate.
   c. Enthusiastically guide children to books
   d. Set an environment that encourages social interaction and dialogue about books

e. Allow for / encourage pupil choice in book selection and what they will do with the books

f. Provide time and materials to allow students to read and respond

3. What Judith Langer has Found Through Her Research (at the National Center in Literature Teaching and Learning) About Teaching Related to Our Goals in Facilitating Positive Dialoguing (Update, University of Albany, Fall, 1992.)

*a. "Reliance on traditional lesson plans often works against teachers goals related to pupil responding/dialoguing about the literature they read."

1) Lesson plans cause teachers to perform expectations about student dialogue that is more like teacher-based interpretation

*b. "The most thought-provoking instruction takes place when teacher's decisions are guided by students' attempts at understanding, as understandings are in the process of being formulated before, during, and after *dialoguing*."

1) **Dialoguing before** - in order to bring knowledge to the text; bridges the gap between what readers know and what they need to know in order to anticipate and predict meaning.

2) **Dialoguing during** - in order to gather clues to meaning, construct a working interpretation, and refine and modify the interpretation as new information is gathered.

3) **Dialoguing after** - share personal feelings, experiences, and knowledge-make connections to other stores and to their own lives

c. The **nature of, context of dialoguing situations** allow opportunities during which teachers can facilitate positives - bring children to realize how their responses are similar and are appropriately different

1) **Context and nature of dialoguing** - Public or Private, Oral or Written
   a) spontaneous whole class input after listening to a story - looking at illustrations
   b) literature study groups
   c) individual conferences
   d) journaling and other literature response activities

4. Some examples of journaling and other literature response activities through which children connect the interactions of characters in stories with their own lives, with the interactions of characters in other stories.
   a. **Simulation Journaling** - Invitation to listeners/readers to enter a story and respond as a participant from the perspective of the narrator of the story or a character(s) in the story.

Book Example: *Home Place*

1. Content and Nature of Dialoguing (after listening)
   a) Spontaneous **whole class** input related to how the author speculated about the discovery of a burned out foundation of a home
   b) ***Show Children's Responses** - Encouraging children to enter the story context and participate/interact in their own alternative version when responding through journaling
   c) **Individual Conferencing** about why they responded as they did - how responses are connected to their own lives
   d) **Whole Class** input about similarities, differences in their responses, why they differ, and why though different the responses are accepted.

b. **Character Response Booth** - An enclosed area in the classroom that includes a tape recorder for children to individually respond/interact from the perspective of a self-selected character who is interacting with one or more characters within an identified story situation.

1) Book Example: *Black Like Kyra, White Like Me*

2) **Context and Nature of Dialoguing** (after individually reading a book)

a) **Story Situation**: Matt and Julie are moving away from the neighborhood where they lived. On the day before they were to move, Christy and Kyra were walking down the street together and saw Matt and Julie in their front yard.

Pretend that you are Matt, or Julie, or Kyra, or Christy. Talk to the other three children about the moving out of the neighborhood. Tell them what you think about it - how you feel about it. *PLAY TAPE OF PUPIL RESPONSE.

b) Individual teacher/pupil conferencing on the responses (why each said what was expressed - whether or not they've had a similar experience.

c) Literature study group - how and why their responses are alike and might be different.

c. **Playwriting** - Invitation to create a screenplay adaptation of a situation, an event based on the original story or story theme. Encourage liberties similar to those that scriptwriters/producers take.

1) Book Example - *Hill of Fire*

a) *Show - Pablo and John Elway

2) Book Example - *The Skirt*

a) **Situational Response** - Writing a screenplay adaptation based on something you've lost that belonged to a parent and how your parent felt, what they did or said about the loss.

d. **A Wailing Wall of Responses** - Invitation to readers to dialogue about character interactions by adding to a classroom bulletin board that prompts response format.

1) **Book Example** - Various child choices that include ethnic/racial characters interacting

2) Format of the Bulletin Board Organizer and Response Strip

OVERLAY

3) If time, have fill in the response format referring to the books they evaluated earlier in the session.

e. **T-Shirt Iron-On's** - Invitation to readers or listeners to economize on words as they dialogue about key/consistent character interactions

1) **Idea**: from The Harvard Education Letter - *Culture Offers Clues to Literacy: An Interview with Lisa Delpit*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Vol VIII, No. 6, Nov./Dec., 1992.

2) Delpit's rationale for T shirt responding through "iron-on's" - offers children who express with limited elaboration an opportunity for success and peer attention. (Worked with Alaskan children)

3) **Book Examples** - various child choices that include ethnic/racial characters interacting (i.e., *Chicken Sunday* - The Children-*Friends Talk*

OVERLAY 6

THOUGHTS, WORDS, ACTIONS IN BOOKS

When _____ said _____ to _____ in the book, _____, I thought _____.

When _____ did _____ to _____ in the book, _____, I wanted to _____.

Through Looks, Miss Eula and the Children - *Believe Those You Love*, Mr. Kodenski and the Children - *Truth Has Rewards)*

f. **Other Vehicles Through Which Dialogue Can Be Encouraged** (Tompkins and McGee - *Teaching Reading with Literature: Case Studies to Action Plans*

1. Simulated Letters
2. Agony Column
3. Simulated Newspapers (Headlines, Articles, Ads, etc.)
4. Stretch to Sketch
5. Puppets
6. Reader's Theater

CLOSING Children's understandings about people of color, whom they meet in literature, are enhanced when they have opportunities to dialogue. Similarities and differences between people can be identified, appreciated, and celebrated. And, the positive models of interaction that characters of color offer hold much potential for connection and transfer to youngsters own life experiences.